

National Airspace Safety Initiative

The FAA is responsible for the management of over 50,000 flights daily transporting more than 2.9 million passengers across our 29 million square miles of airspace. Running an air traffic control system is a 24/7 operation that requires constant investment and vigilant innovation. The aviation stakeholder community agrees that for the aviation system to flourish we must meaningfully invest in the staffing, safety systems, and facilities that are the backbone to a safe and efficient airspace. To that end, we request that Congress (1) include funding to address these systemic challenges in reconciliation; and (2) establish parity with our infrastructure partners to allow for sustained and predictable funding that enables the FAA to act with certainty in setting and executing key business decisions

Staffing. Meeting workforce demands is a nationwide challenge across all sectors, and the need for highly specialized air traffic controllers is no exception. In June 2023, a Department of Transportation Inspector General investigation found that the “FAA continues to face staffing challenges and lacks a plan to address them, which in turn poses a risk to the continuity of air traffic operations.” At the end of Fiscal Year 2024 (FY24), there were 1,020 fewer Certified Professional Controllers (CPCs) than there were at the end of FY12, a 9% decrease. **At the end of FY24, FAA netted 34 CPCs.** As of January 22, 2025, the FAA has 10,791 CPC’s which is 2,371 CPCs below the present FAA CPC target and 3,544 CPCs below the Collaborative Resource Workgroup (CRWG) CPC target. The FAA has not made sufficient progress on hiring and training controllers, and it must accelerate their work through expanded capacity at the Oklahoma Training Facility and Air Traffic Enhanced Collegiate Training Initiatives (ATECTI) over the next 7 to 10 years. The controller shortage threatens to continue shrinking the capacity of the National Airspace System (NAS). In 2024 the FAA requested that air carriers operate 10% fewer flights to and from the New York metropolitan area. This reduction in capacity hurts consumers and our economy but is necessary to maintain operational reliability. Additionally, a shortage of technicians manifests itself through increased restoration times during an equipment outage and more traffic delays for the flying public. Addressing these staffing shortages must be a top priority for the Administration and Congress.

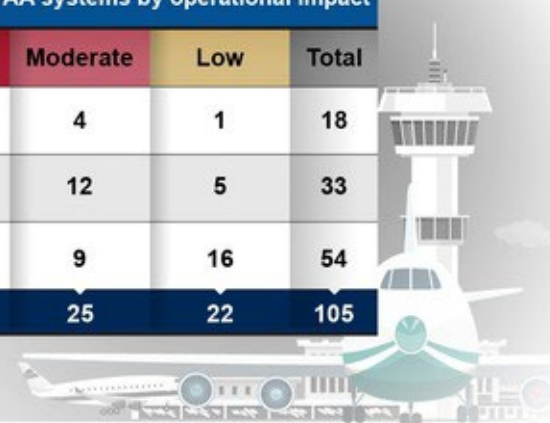
Safety Systems. There are systems sustainability and maintenance-related issues at virtually all FAA locations, which can lead to operational risks for the NAS. Roughly 90% of FAA’s budget for Facilities and Equipment (F&E) goes to sustainment, while true NAS systems improvements remain minimal. The FAA has approximately \$5.2 billion in sustainment backlog for facilities and systems that directly support national air space operations.

According to the Government Accountability Office, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA)’s operational risk assessment that evaluated the sustainability of all ATC systems found “that of FAA’s 138 systems, 51 (37 percent) were unsustainable and 54 (39 percent) were potentially unsustainable. Of the 105 unsustainable and potentially unsustainable systems, 58 (29 unsustainable and 29 potentially unsustainable systems) have critical operational impacts on the safety and efficiency of the national airspace (see figure).

Modernization and resiliency of the FAA’s air traffic control system must be paired with a robust and highly skilled federal technical workforce to maintain and repair the critical systems necessary for the FAA’s round-the-clock operation.

Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) Air Traffic Control (ATC) System Safety and Efficiency Operational Impact Categories by Sustainment Rating

Sustainability rating		Number of FAA systems by operational impact			
		Critical	Moderate	Low	Total
A	Unsustainable due to shortages in spares and shortfalls in funding.	13	4	1	18
B	Unsustainable due to shortfalls in funding or capability.	16	12	5	33
C	Potentially unsustainable due to possible shortfalls in funding or capability.	29	9	16	54
Total		58	25	22	105



Sources: FAA 2023 operational risk assessment; serz72/stock.adobe.com (illustration). | GAO-25-107917

Congress has routinely funded the FAA close to the budget request while remaining within the budget caps. However, the budget request has never fully addressed the growing sustainment backlog, and the true capital needs of the FAA. This is true not only of facilities, but the equipment that FAA uses as well as desperately needed technology. Many of the unstaffed and understaffed infrastructure programs have funding lags leading to compounding deployment delays. As these facilities and equipment age, the repairs become more challenging, as antiquated components become more difficult to obtain and more expensive.

Facilities. The FAA operates more than 300 air traffic control facilities and on average these facilities are between 30 and 60 years old and many have exceeded their useful life. In addition to aging facilities, FAA released its first annual National Airspace Plan in 1982, and the air traffic modernization effort that was started then is far from complete.

FAA must prioritize the modernization of these facilities and upgrade the air traffic systems. In addition, Congress must ensure predictable resources to meet these needed improvements. Many of these air traffic control systems provide critical safety and efficiency benefits and the inability of FAA to modernize the air traffic system is straining the growth of the airspace. For example, the failure of the NOTAM system two years ago triggered the first nationwide stop of air traffic in 20 years. The FAA should include the update to this system in its modernization priorities.

The recent FAA reauthorization bill provides a roadmap for increasing the efficiency of the air traffic system, enhances the air traffic workforce, evaluates the capital investment needs and examines the consolidation or reorganization of facilities and equipment. But more needs to be done. Given the known sustainment backlog and the tremendous backlog associated just for radars and facilities, we request that the Administration and Congress work to make investments that help ensure the U.S. has a world-class system that maintains its safety and efficiency through the deployment of modern technology and infrastructure...

Efficiencies. Although today's modern aircraft are equipped for a more efficient air traffic system, the lack of modern air traffic technologies limits these capabilities. A modern air traffic control system should enable more aircraft to operate safely in closer proximity to each other and without constant air traffic control vectoring. The current system does not, leading to less fuel-efficient routings and more time delays. With a congested airspace projected to get even busier, it is critical that the FAA optimize the

airspace and minimize delays and disruptions that lead to delays and cancelled flights. The FAA has invested in technologies to improve traffic flow management and airspace utilization to maximize the number of aircraft operations that can be safely accommodated into the system, but they are not being fully optimized. Some of the effective procedures, such as TFDM and Required Navigation Performance (RNP)/ Performance Based Navigation (PBN), could improve the efficiency of the airspace. With increased investment in the air traffic systems, we recommend that FAA implement the corresponding procedures that will increase the efficiency of the airspace while working collaboratively with stakeholders. We also support jointly identifying areas that would benefit from airspace modernization and redesign to improve safety and efficiency. In addition, we recommend that FAA seek operational efficiencies through prudent divestment from legacy NAS elements and innovative procurement methods. Increases in funding should be coupled with project delivery methods that provide accountability.

Budgetary Reform. We stand by to engage and discuss optimal pathways for creating sustainable and predictable funding mechanisms with Congress. Along with a general fund contribution, the FAA is mainly funded from the Airport and Airway Trust Fund (AATF), which is supported by aviation fuel taxes, ticket taxes and other fees. Those funds can only be used by the FAA through conventional Congressional appropriations, and they are subject to all the Federal budget discretionary spending limits. The Congressional Budget Office's (CBO) June 2024 baseline projections for the AATF show End-of-Year uncommitted balances of ~\$6 billion for FY25 and growing to ~\$17.5 billion by 2034. The FAA must be allowed to fully utilize the existing funds within the AATF to meet current obligations under the recently passed FAA reauthorization law and execute long-term focused investment to modernize the national air space. Developing a predictable source of funding via a multi-year account is necessary to begin recapitalizing major infrastructure assets and ensure the continued safety and efficiency of US airspace.

The FAA must also become exempt from government shutdowns. As a major operating agency running a 24/7/365 system, government shutdowns can become harmful to the economy and hurt the development and innovation of modernizing the national air space.